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ABSTRACT

This paper describes two personal development groups for procrastinators, the "Unblocking" group and "The Manana Syndrome." Theoretical background for the groups is presented based on behavioral techniques adapted from Lakein's work on time management and Ellis' work on cognitive therapy. Differences between the two groups are outlined: Unblocking uses art therapy to help graduate students stalled on their dissertations, while The Manana Syndrome uses traditional verbal techniques to help any student or staff member with time management problems. Specific information about the format of each group is presented. There is also a description of some of the common difficulties which arise during the group sessions and an explanation of how the group process is used to help change the participants. (JAC)

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# Dealing with the Mañana Syndrome: Some Strategies Using Cognitive, Behavioral, and Art Therapy Techniques *

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Washington, D.C.

In
Procrastination and University Students:
Theories and programming

Douglas M. Daher, Chair

Panel presentation for
The American Psychological Association Conference
Toronto, Canada

August 24, 1984

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## Abstract

At the George Washington University Counseling Center we offer two personal developmental groups for procrastinators, "Unblocking" and "The Mañana Syndrome." Both use behavioral techniques adapted from Lakein's (1973) work on time management and cognitive therapy from Ellis' work (Ellis, 1962; Ellis & Knaus, 1978).

"Unblocking" is different from "The Mañana Syndrome" in its use of Art Therapy to illicit feelings about being blocked, the underlying issues, and the irrational thoughts that perpetuate the behavior. More traditonal, verbal group therapy techniques are used in "The Mañana Syndrome" to the same ends. The art materials are additionally useful as they create a "material transference" which parallels the writing process.

The client population for "Unblocking" is different as it is only offered to stalled graduate students stuck on their theses and dissertations. "The Mañana Syndrome" is open to any student or staff member. Even with differences in membership and format both groups follow the stages of optimism, pessimism, and realism outlined by Burka and Yuen (1982).

Presented in this paper is specific information about the format of each of these two groups. There is also a description of some of the common issues experienced by participants and how the group process is used to help them change.

## Introduction

I have been interested in procrastination for many years because of its effect on me and on my work. It was a minor problem during college, since I was able to accomplish the tasks I needed to do late or at the last minute. It wasn't until I was in graduate school facing my dissertation that I realized the amount of stress that it created and that I could no longer delay dealing with the issue. It was there that I first applied behavioral and cognitive techniques to get myself to finish.

Because of this experience, I have empathy and concern for students who are afflicted by the "Mañana Syndrome." Initially, I thought that I could help them get going on stalled projects by teaching time management techniques. I soon realized that most of the students who were stuck already knew, better than most, how to manage their time; they just couldn't.

Additional motivation to start a group for procrastinators came from one of the Graduate School's Associate Deans who was concerned about the increasing number of A.B.D.s. He had found that the students most likely to drop out of their programs had accumulated three or more incompletes during their first two semesters at GW.

With this in mind I got together with the Center's Coordinator of Art therapy Services, Sandy Geller, who also had a personal interest in procrastination, having suffered, the year before, while she avoided her masters thesis. From our collaboration came a group we called "Unblocking: Get off your A.B.D.!" Because of our own therapeutic styles it became an integration of art therapy and cognitive/behavioral techniques. In the past four years we have offered five or six "Unblocking" groups and presented two "Unblocking" workshops specifically for art therapists.

Because some students were turned off by the use of art materials in "Unblocking" and since there were many other students stuck on a variety of projects other than dissertations and theses, I developed a second group, "The Mañana Syndrome," which I have led each semester for three years.

For my presentation, today, I want to describe the format we have used in these two groups and tell you about some of the students who participated.

## Theoretical Background

Lakein (1973) in his excellent book on time management, How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life, said that you can only define procrastination after you have determined an A-1 priority activity to be accomplished. Procrastination is the avoidance of this task to do lesser A, B, C, and no priority activities. Silver and Sabini (1982) agree, "the irrationality of procrastination is rooted in rationality: it depends on the fact that a person knows what to do but then does something else."

Because of the irrational aspects of procrastination alluded to by Silver and Sabini, I have found that the cognitive perspective of Ellis (Ellis & Knaus, 1978) is a useful framework for understanding the phenomenon. Ellis sees it as a vicious cycle of deciding to do something, needlessly delaying it, noting the disadvantages of this avoidance, continued delay, self-flagellation and rationalization, continued procrastination, more guilt, and ultimately doing, not doing, or rushing the task.

He believes that procrastination comes from a variety of negative, irrational emotions and beliefs. He considers self-downing, low tolerance for frustration, and hostility to be major factors, with perfectionism, the "dire need for love," and negative emotions like guilt and depression contributing to the syndrome. My experience with students and those of Burka and Yuen (1982) confirm the importance of such underlying issues. I would, however, give more credibility to the importance of perfectionism. Many of the students I see do not start tasks because they are worried that they won't be able to do them well. Others are so busy evaluating what they are doing that they become stuck or find the task so painful that they avoid it.

## Unblocking Groups

For "Unblocking" Sandy and I developed a five to seven session format for four to eight stuck graduate students. Each session meets for an hour and a half. The art therapy process that we use involves creating an accepting, permissive environment, encouraging students to use art materials either to create whatever they would like, followed by a possible elaboration that focuses on specific aspects of the issue. For materials we use water color, pastel, collage, and clay sculpture.

Once a project is completed we ask students to talk about it, describing what the art means, looks to be, how the

process felt, etc. In this way students talk about what blocks them and their feelings about being blocked. The art is especially useful for breaking through the rationalizations of intellectualized graduate students.

In the first session we ask each student to make a pastel drawing to serve as an introduction. With this first art experience, we find benign resistance. Students have said "But I don't know how to draw," "What should I do?", "I haven't done this since elementary school," etc. When the drawings are completed each student describes his/her own. We encourage them to ask questions of one another, point out similarities and differences, and promote an accepting attitude toward each other's work, issues, and feelings.

An important part of this first session is asking students to imagine their specific "block." After they have a good mental image of it, we give them a chunk of clay and ask that they model it into what they pictured. In one session a student created a large clam shell with teeth. Inside the clam was a pearl. Others have made walls, mountains, mushrooms, and assorted barriers.

I usually follow this with a didactic presentation of several time management strategies that were developed by Lakein (1973). (Some of these techniques are summarized in the handout which is attached in the appendix of this paper.) Ending the first session, we ask each student to develop a realizable goal for the duration of the group. Goals range from finding a dissertation topic, writing Chapter I, reading a series of articles, to hiring a baby sitter so there's time to work on a thesis. For homework we ask each student to record on a time sheet how he/she spends time during the next week.

The second session begins with each student developing a series of goals for the next five years, year, and semester. These goals are prioritized using Lakein's (1973) model, A's, B's, C's. Students are asked to compare their priorities with how they indicated on their homework they had used their time during the past week. Most find that they were not using their time the way that they want to use it.

For this session's art experience students draw some of the feelings they have about being blocked. The colors of these pastels have usually been dark and morose. Some drawings show tension and nervous energy, while others are barren and empty. With this exercize the students are able to recognize the issues underlying their procrastination. Many express their fears of failure and fears of success, along with their

needs to please and be liked by authority figures. These issues can be combined with their anger about having to do the projects which have them stalled. They talk about their needs to be perfect and how they use procrastination as a self-imposed handicap which protects them from having to see their own imperfections.

In one particular group the role of authority figures was especially strong, so Sandy asked each group member to imagine what it would be like to complete their thesis and present it to an imagined authority, friend, family member. The responses were so powerful such that in future groups we continued to use this "birthing" activity.

In the second or third session we begin to introduce concepts from rational emotive therapy to help dispute the irrational thoughts and change the illogical feelings which the art work had encouraged the students to explore. For example, some compulsive students are asked whether it would be possible to create the perfect dissertation as they expected themselves to do. Others are encouraged to see their procrastination as part their difficulty with frustration and that when they complete their stalled project they will feel better about themselves.

By the fourth session of each group some very interesting dynamics have started which we use therapeutically. In the group I am responsible for teaching the goal setting and time management techniques. I also begin each session asking how each person was coming with the objective he/she had set. In contrast to this, Sandy places few demands on the students and is perceived as being completely accepting. As the group has reached the pessimistic stage (Burka & Yuen, 1982), many participants feel that they have not lived up to their unrealistic expectations for changing. As a result some are angry, projecting it on me, feeling I am responsible for their not making the progress they wanted to make.

We use this negative transference as it parallels the feelings evoked from the "birthing" activity. The discussion of the students' anger helps them realize that only they can decide what was important to them and that only they can take responsibility for doing it. While I am an authority figure, becoming angry with me and trying to get even by not doing what they want to do for themselves is self-defeating and ultimately doesn't affect me. At this point some students have recognized how their not working is a way of getting even with a faculty member or parent who has angered them.

The art activities themselves create an additional form of transference which we have labeled "material transference." One student graphically portrayed this by making a painting of a series of horizontal blue lines which he crossed out with red X's. He said that this picture represented how he felt about doing art and writing when he was in grade school. The red marks were the teacher's corrections. Now he said he was stuck writing because he feared the evaluation of others and was scared that his paper would not be perfect. Doing art as part of "Unblocking" had helped him accept his own product. His initial concern about being judged had restricted what he could create. Becoming more comfortable and willing to risk, he noticed that he was more creative and prolific. This lesson he was able to generalize to writing his thesis. "Unblocking" participants often notice that the production of art in group parallels the writing process in that the structure of our sessions required people to create the best they could within a specific time frame without much direction.

Another strategy we use involves positive imagery. Before asking students to make a second clay sculpture, we ask them to relax and imagine themselves working on their project ultimately completing it. (It is also suggested that they can practice this technique at home one or two times a day for a salutary effect.) Here they work once more with clay modifying the one they made perviously. The woman who had made the clam, following some of our time management suggestions, changed the large menancing clam with teeth into a series of small clams each with their own small pearls. Other students have built bridges, cut things away, climbed over, and burrowed under their old sculptures.

We conclude "Unblocking" with a collage experience where we ask students to imagine that they have completed their dissertations and have handed them in. The students then artistically portray what it's like on the other side. One man made a cellophane kite supported by balsam which he constructed directly on the table, free of the constraints of any grounding material. Another student made pictures of flowers that were blossoming. One created a house on top of a mountain that she indicated would be her retreat, a place to relax complete with pets and friends.

Many of our students have reported that they were able to go ahead and complete their theses. Most accomplished the goal that they had established for the group. Written evaluations indicate that everyone who has participated has enjoyed "Unblocking" and felt they had made some progress. The chart that is attached in the appendix shows how we conceptualize the integration of cognitive, behavior, and art therapy

techniques and how we believe they influenced the group process (Geller & Wiggers, 1982).

## The Mañana Syndrome

As I mentioned, "The Mañana Syndrome" is different from "Unblocking" in that it does not involve art therapy and is open to any procrastinator; not just stalled graduate students. The issues students present, however, are very much the same. The format for "The Mañana Syndrome" is similar to the one described by Burka and Yuen (1982) in their Psychology Today article. I find it a useful handout for my first session, because students quickly identify with the people described in it.

In this first session, after introductions have been made, I ask the students to define procrastination, discuss how it is a problem for them, and make a list of all projects that are presently being delayed. This process of telling war stories creates instant group cohesiveness and motivation.

I stress the importance of attendance at all group meetings, pointing out that the decision to attend or not to attend is one that should not be taken lightly. Non-attendance is procrastinating on learning how to stop procrastinating; therefore, should the student be thinking about not attending the group, he/she has the most need to come. This tactic seems to have been successful. Attendance for "The Mañana Syndrome" is usually better than it is for other personal development groups.

Besides describing "Seven Common Mistakes" in time management (indulging yourself, socializing, reading, doing it yourself, overdoing it, running away, and daydreaming) (Lakein, 1973), I ask students to make a list of their favorite rationalizations for not accomplishing priority tasks. Having already identified these rationalizations is helpful later, when we consider how people think irrationally and work to dispute such thoughts. In this session I also teach Lakein's concept of the decision point asking students to regularly ask themselves, "What is the best use of my time right now?" Either the individual is doing the A task or they are doing something else. Being aware of this decision point forces the student to take more responsibility for how he/she is choosing to use time; it also highlights the rationalizations that allow them to continue procrastinating.

As Burka and Yuen (1982) do in their groups, I ask students to develop a concrete goal for the workshop which will indicate whether it has been successful or not. For

homework I give students time sheets to keep track of how they use their time during the week, ask them to read the Psychology Today article, and identify additional rationalizations that they find at decision points.

Each of the five to seven sessions of the group, I open by asking group members to describe their procrastination prevention successes. For the second session I follow this with the same goal setting exersize that I use in "Unblocking." Then I ask participants to compare their goals with how their time sheets indicate they spent the past week. I also teach specific time management techniques: the swiss cheese approach, leading tasks, positive procrastination, not doing the unimportant, working during prime time, the Pareto Principle (80% of the results come from 20% of the effort), saying "no," using rewards and a token economy, etc.

By this time students are eager to talk about what they have learned about themselves and why they procrastinate. Some will say that they recognized themselves in the articles I assigned. Others will have come to new realizations based on looking at their decision points and how they used time during the week. From now on the group behaves like a traditional therapy group as we work to understand and identify each member's particular issues.

While I still ask students about how they are progressing on their A priority tasks and make specific behavioral suggestions, much of our time in future sessions is spent discussing the "underlying" reasons and the irrational thinking that create their procrastination. Using a R.E.T. model (Ellis, 1962), I encourage students to identify their irrational thoughts and to use logical thinking to dispute them.

For example some specific students in these groups indicated that they were the first members of their families to attend college and that they had plans to continue school after GW. They saw their procrastinating as a way of protecting themselves from becoming different and being rejected by relatives for being "a brain." Investigating these issues further, they saw how they were thinking irrationally and that they would be the same person no matter whether they went to school or not and that chances were high that members of their family would still love them even if they got a Ph.D. or an M.D. They also considered how having a degree might change some relationships with the conclusion that the consequences would not be awful as originally assumed. Even if there were negative changes, the reality would be manageable.

Because of my schedule, it is sometimes not possible for me to meet with this group for a consecutive six week program. I have found that a break can be therapeutic and that learning along with accomplishing tasks can be reinforced by the use of a "buddy system." Before we skip a week, I ask group members to pair up with one another and work to help each other complete their objectives. This involves discussing and suggesting time management techniques, breaking projects into smaller tasks, and contracting to get together during the next two weeks to see how things are going.

As with Burka and Yuen's groups and with "Unblocking," students in "The Manana Syndrome" reach the pessimistic stage as they recognize that they know how to manage time yet they are not doing so and that there isn't an instant, easy answer to their problems. Identifying and working with the irrational thinking of this phase leads to a more realistic approach to themselves and their goals.

Dealing with these issues usually occurs in the final two sessions of the group. In the last session we discuss ways of maintaining the behaviors that have been learned. We also consider the reality of some backsliding, working toward personal acceptance and motivation for continuing to work to keep from procrastinating.

With the group's conclusion most of the students realize that they won't be completely cured of all procrastination, however, they see how they can manage their lives more efficiently and responsibly. They also have a firm understanding of the role that procrastination plays and how they can dispute the irrational thinking that allows it to continue. Many finish the tasks that they had agreed to complete at the beginning of the group. Some of the others, who don't finish, see that their expectations for themselves were initially unrealistic.

At GW we will continue leading these groups because of their popularity and because they seem to have a strong immediate effect on the students who participate. Additionally I find them to be very enjoyable to lead because they attract a diverse group of students who have many strong skills and potentials which are thwarted by their own inablity to get themselves to do what they know is important for them to do.

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Appendix

USES OF ART THERAPY AND COGNITIVE/BEHAVIORAL APPROACHES

IN UNBLOCKING

T. Thorne Wiggers

| Art Therapy | Rational Emotive Therapy | Behavioral Strategies |
|---|---|---|
| Introduction of individuals in the group, first drawing. | | Definition of successful outcome. |
| Definition of problem. | Identification of irrational thinking causing immobilizing feelings. | Lifetime goals and next steps. Prioritizing and determination of objectives Analysis of time use. |
| Imagining of block, with clay sculptures. | | |
| Identification of immobilizing feelings through structured art activities, i.e., anger, fear of failure, fear of success, fear of the future. | Disputing process to change irrational thoughts and negative feelings. | |
| Engagement of client in art work facilitates taking responsibility for personal change and completion of blocked tasks. | Recognition of personal responsibility. | |
| The invitation to be playful with art materials and the creation of art products generalize to the writing process. | | |
| The acceptance of art products facilitates the acceptance of written work. | Elimination of perfectionistic myths. | Techniques to avoid perfectionism. Imagined practice of a successful outcome. |
| Benevolent time restriction facilitates successful time management. | Increased willingness to do difficult/distasteful tasks. | Techniques to avoid procrastination. Time management skills for completion. |

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# BASIC PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE TIME MANAGEMENT

DEA FORNEY, DIRECTOR OF CAREER SERVICES, GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

1. SETTING GOALS
2. REGARDING GOAL ATTAINMENT AS ENERGIZING
3. ESTABLISHING PRIORITIES FOR TASKS
   - A-B-C (LAKEIN)
4. THE PARETO PRINCIPLE
   - 80% OF YOUR RESULTS COME FROM 20% OF YOUR EFFORTS. THEREFORE, FOCUS ON THAT 20%.
5. WORKING SMARTER, NOT HARDER (LAKEIN)
6. BEING EFFECTIVE VERSUS BEING EFFICIENT
7. SAYING "NO"
   - BASED ON PRIORITIES, SKILLS, INDIVIDUAL CAMPUS CONTEXT, ETC.
8. MAKING CHANGES GRADUALLY (BEHAVIORAL/ATTITUDINAL)
9. HAVING A REWARDS SYSTEM
   - BASED ON RESULTS, NOT ACTIVITY
10. PLANNED UNAVAILABILITY
    - BLOCKING OFF TIME AND WORKING WITH THE DOOR CLOSED
    - IF YOU'RE TOO AVAILABLE, DO YOU REALLY CONCENTRATE ON THE OTHER PERSON?
11. DO, DROP, DELAY, OR DELEGATE TASKS (LAKEIN)
    - DELEGATION IS SOMETIMES HAMPERED BY LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN SUBORDINATES, USUALLY DUE TO THEIR POOR PAST PERFORMANCE. TO DIAGNOSE AND TREAT THE NATURE OF SUCH A PROBLEM, SUPERVISORS MAY FIND FRITZ'S ANALYSIS OF WHY SUBORDINATES FAIL TO BE HELPFUL. THEY:
      - DON'T KNOW WHAT'S EXPECTED (KNOWLEDGE PROBLEM)
      - DON'T KNOW HOW THEY ARE DOING (INFORMATION PROBLEM)
      - CAN'T DO THE WORK (SKILLS PROBLEM)
      - WON'T DO THE WORK (ATTITUDE PROBLEM)
      - LACK ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT (COMMUNICATIONS PROBLEM)
      - HAVE A POOR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SUPERVISOR (PERSONALITY PROBLEM)

12. MAINTAINING A TIME LOG

    - KEEPING TRACK OF WHERE YOUR TIME IS GOING

    - ACCOUNTABILITY WITHOUT BECOMING A PRISONER OF YOUR OWN SYSTEM

13. CONTINGENCY PLANNING

    - ALLOWING FOR THE UNEXPECTED

14. SELF-DISCIPLINE, SELF-MANAGEMENT

    - CONTROL RESIDES WITHIN YOU

15. WASTING TIME WHEN NECESSARY

    - ALLOWING YOURSELF BREATHING SPACE

16. REFUSING TO DO THE UNIMPORTANT

    - ATTACKING ADMINISTRIVIA

17. THE ART OF WASTEBASKETRY

18. BALANCING WORK AND PLAY

19. "TO DO" LISTS (LAKEIN)

    - USING TIME EFFECTIVELY VERSUS COMPLETING THE LIST

20. BEING CONSIDERATE OF OTHERS' TIME

21. PRACTICING THE "SWISS CHEESE" METHOD (LAKEIN)

    - POKING HOLES IN HIGH PRIORITY TASKS WHEN YOU HAVE ONLY A SHORT TIME TO INVEST

22. MAXIMIZING GAINS VERSUS MINIMIZING LOSSES (LAKEIN)

23. IDENTIFYING PRIME TIME (THINKING) AND AVAILABLE TIME (CONTACT)

    - BASED ON YOUR OWN INTERNAL TIMETABLE

24. ASKING LAKEIN'S QUESTION

    - "WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO ME? WHAT'S THE BEST USE OF MY TIME RIGHT NOW?"

25. MAXIMIZING SELF-IMPOSED TIME

    - VERSUS BOSS-, SYSTEM-, AND SUBORDINATE- IMPOSED TIME (ONCKEN & WASS)

THE WRITINGS OF LAKEIN AND MACKENZIE SHOULD BE NOTED. ALSO GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGED IS ASSISTANCE PROVIDED BY TOM BACHHUBER.

# OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE TIME MANAGEMENT

DEA FORNEY, DIRECTOR OF CAREER SERVICES, GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

1. PERFECTIONISM
   - HELPFUL ONLY IF APPLIED SELECTIVELY
2. PROCRASTINATION (NEGATIVE VERSUS POSITIVE) (LAKEIN)
   - NEGATIVE = DISTRACTERS
   - POSITIVE = DOING NOTHING
3. INTERRUPTIONS
   - "THE PRESUMPTION OF LEGITIMACY" (MACKENZIE)
4. WAITING
5. OVERACCESSIBILITY
   - NOT REGULATING TRAFFIC
   - ESPECIALLY TEMPTING TO THOSE WITH AN EXTREME PEOPLE EMPHASIS
6. MEETINGS
7. OVERSCHEDULING
   - ESTIMATING TIME UNREALISTICALLY
8. THE "BUCKETS OF SWEAT" SYNDROME (PEARSE)
   - A MYTH - THE HARDER YOU WORK THE MORE YOU GET DONE
   - CONFUSING ACTIVITY WITH RESULTS
9. MEMOITIS
10. FEAR OF MISTAKES
    - "NEXT TO BEING RIGHT, THE BEST OF ALL THINGS IS TO BE CLEARLY AND DEFINITELY WRONG, BECAUSE YOU WILL COME OUT SOMEWHERE."

      - THOMAS HUXLEY

11. FEAR OF BEING DISLIKED
12. FEAR OF FAILURE
    - A MAJOR MOTIVATOR FOR AVOIDING TOP PRIORITY TASKS
    - IRRATIONAL SELF-MESSAGES

13. PARKINSON'S LAW

- WORK EXPANDS TO FILL THE TIME AVAILABLE

14. PARKINSON'S LAW IN REVERSE

- EXTENDING THE TIME RATHER THAN EXPANDING THE TASK TO FILL THE TIME (E.G. TAKING WORK HOME, ETC.)

15. "ENHANCING THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS"

- THE RIGHT TO AN "EQUAL VOTE"

- A PROBLEM UNIQUE TO THE EDUCATIONAL SETTING, ACCORDING TO MACKENZIE

16. INSTANT ANSWERS

- OR, IN MACKENZIE'S WORDS, "THE TYRANNY OF THE URGENT"

17. IF YOU'RE ALONE, YOU'RE NOT DOING ANYTHING IMPORTANT

18. TIME WASTING ESCAPES

- E.G. DAYDREAMING, OVERDOING IT, RUNNING AWAY, ETC.

19. OVERWORKING

- AS A RESULT OF THE NEED TO BE BUSY, THE FEAR OF FAILURE, THE WORK ETHIC, OR LACK OF OTHER INTERESTS (HAMMAN)

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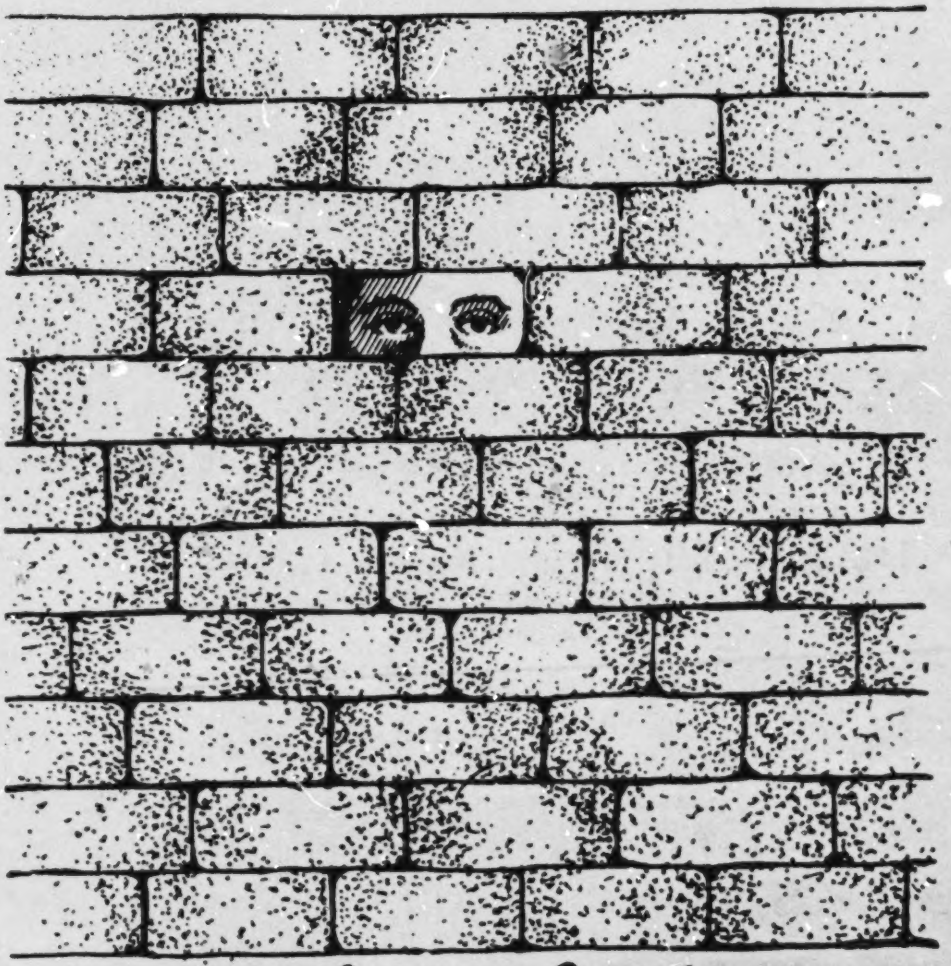

# unblocking

This group is for graduate students who are having difficulties completing theses and dissertations. Creative energies will be stimulated through the use of varied, simple art materials: collage, clay, paints, and pastels. Time management and procrastination will be tackled with behavioral approaches. No previous art experience is necessary.

Leaders: Sandy Geller and T. Thorne Wiggers
Time: Tuesday Mornings, 10:00-11:30 a.m.
October 5 - November 9 (6 sessions)

**Counseling Center**

**SIGN-UPS: 676-6550**